

# RONNIES

**A**N URBAN FABLE told in the Italian ghettos of America would bring a wry, knowing smile to the lips of Ronnie O'Sullivan. It concerns a man who goes to the doctor, says he is depressed, nothing can lift his gloom. The doctor thinks for a minute, before saying, "treatment is simple. The great clown, Paglacci is in town. Go and see him." The man then bursts into tears, saying, "but, I am Paglacci."

For most of the last two years, Ronnie O'Sullivan has been snooker's version of that beleaguered clown. Cloned in the Alex Higgins mode, when Ronnie first burst onto the scene, it was thought the future of snooker was his.

However, much like the preceding prodigy of the sport, everywhere Ronnie turned, the whiff of controversy permeated. O'Sullivan became a guaranteed draw for tournaments, simply due to his image. In short, the Romford Rocket felt a caricature of himself.

"I am not a controversial person and I never had any intention of being controversial. It is only the way I was perceived," O'Sullivan says. He looked comfortable and relaxed midway through an exhibition tour of Dublin last week. Sitting in the foyer of the Burlington hotel, he explained how his projected image in the media may have adversely affected his snooker in the past.

"All I want to do is play the game, but it is hard sometimes when people want to make you out a certain way and do everything to make sure people see you as this person who likes controversy. People pick a paper up and assume you are that kind of person, when I never was," he relates between sips of Guinness.

If O'Sullivan is paranoid, it may be because they are really out to get him. In the past, the World Snooker Association handed him a hefty fine for not according an opponent the proper respect. Ronnie found himself before a disciplinary board, simply for playing a match left-handed.

"There was no harm in it," he says. "There is nothing in the rule book saying you can't play left-handed. I have made centuries playing that way. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how you play, with one hand or any other way as long as you can win."

For a sport currently in desperate need of entertainers, O'Sullivan was doing what comes natural to him, entertaining, giving the public something to pay for. Alain Robideaux, his 'embarrassed' opponent at the time, didn't see it that way, refusing to shake Ronnie's hand at the end of the game and lodging a complaint, ultimately leading to the fine.

With farcical incidents such as this, it is little wonder O'Sullivan has been quoted in the past as about to quit the game. He has a right to feel victimised. Last year, when traces of cannabis were found in his system, the WSA looked on gleefully. The World Championship was starting in the Crucible, and they had a talking point. Hands rubbed eagerly in anticipation. Ronnie got a very public slap on the wrists. Publicity turned early game reports from newspaper briefs to full page stories.

"It didn't help my game," he states morosely. "I wish they had left it 'til after Sheffield to let it out. But they decided to tell everyone half-way through the Championship, which affected my run." He muses on what happened, taking a drink, before hinting at the real reasons behind the admonishment.

"I suppose, it was a chance for them to set an example. But I mean, it has happened to two or three other players and was dealt with privately. When it happened to me, it was blown out of proportion, which was great for them because it got snooker talked about again."

Snooker has not been talked about for a long time. The sport exploded in the eighties, only



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because of the characters it produced. There was Alex Higgins, constantly sniffing and twitching, a ball of nervous energy. There was Jimmy White, eyes bloodshot and glazed, a little boy lost with a hangover. Bill Weribneck, who needed 12 pints to kick-start his game. And the others, Dennis Taylor, Kirk Stevens, Tony Knowles. The list is legendary and endless.

Snooker has been remarkable in the nineties only for its distinct lack of individuals. Straight-laced and serious competitors, chalking the cue po-faced before returning to their Ballygowans. The new image needed someone to provide colour. And controversy.

Enter Ronnie. "This sport has got serious, but then, every sport loses its great characters and new ones have to be created, because sport needs them for people to be able to relate to it. Maybe, that is why I am popular because I was attacking, played fast like Higgins and White, and am different from most of the players around. That may be the key to my popularity, I don't know what it is," he declares modestly.

However, much like Jimmy White, you get a feeling O'Sullivan couldn't have been anything but popular. His swiftness, his carefree attitude. And, of course, the ingenious talent.

First picked up the cue at 8, by 11, he was hitting centuries. At 15, he completed his first maximum, turning professional the following year.

It was the incredible start to his pro career, which saw him climb into the top 16 within two years, that led to the volcanic hype and the expectant drooling of snooker fans in need of a

hero. World Champion by the time he was 20, they roared. Someone to dominate the game like never before. It never materialised.

"I have been used to the expectation since I was kid," he says. "As an amateur, I was expected to do well. Whatever level I have played at, I have been favourite, so that sort of pressure was nothing new. I expect a lot from myself anyway, so the person I let down the most was myself."

**T**HE UNBELIEVABLE expectation meant Ronnie never became the youngest ever World Champion. A record he seemed born to break.

"I was disappointed," he admits in a regretful tone. "I thought I should have won it at least once in those first four years and when I saw other people win it, I thought it should be me, but y'know, my time will come." He speaks these words with an assured and confident verve, like this will be the year.

It could be. One tournament victory behind him, a defeat by Marco Fu notwithstanding, O'Sullivan is playing like the boy of yore. The 18-year-old Londoner who had the Crucible at feet.

"I have been having a good season so far. I have won one tournament already and am provisionally ranked no. 2. If I continue with this form, I feel confident of becoming no. 1. But really, I just want a build a consistent season til Sheffield and really go for it when I get there."

This year's World Championships could be the most open in years. With Stephen Hendry going through a dip in form, the sport is no longer ruled by a sole leader. It may time for Ronnie to step forward and clutch his rightful mantle.

"There is a number of very good players who will all fancy their chances this year. John Higgins, Mark Williams, Ken. And of course, you can never count Hendry out. he's hard to beat even when he's not playing well," he states.

**T**HE CRUCIBLE is on a different planet from any other event in the sport. Even those who find snooker tedious would be partial to a spot of the action from Sheffield. Especially if the Whirlwind was playing. Or these days, Ronnie. It comes as no great surprise to learn Ronnie hero-worshipped Jimmy as a youngster, and White has been a help to O'Sullivan on the circuit, when things weren't going right.

"Jimmy has been as good as gold to me. He's a diamond geezer," he says admiringly. "I first met him when I was fourteen in Birmingham snooker halls when he walked in one day and came up and shook hands with me. That was one of my greatest thrills and we have got on since. He has really helped me."

O'Sullivan doesn't want to follow White's career path too closely, or he may replace him as the greatest player never to win the world title. Regardless of whether he becomes World Champion this year or not, one part of his career will be forever etched in the annals of the Crucible. The magic five-minute maximum two years ago. Ronnie becomes animated speaking about the moment, which stands as the brightest spot in his career.

"Unbelievable," he exclaims, beaming. "It was when I was on 56, I thought yeah, I can do this. I was feeling the pressure. I remember chalking the cue coming up to the blue and the chalk slipping. After I hit the blue, I thought, oh my god I have a maximum here. I was shaking all the way through the next frame. Stephen [Hendry] came up after the break and shook my hand, and said 'that was harder than winning the championship'"

Although he has recorded over 60 maximums in his career and even shot one in his first night's exhibition in Dublin, he never deliberately goes out to get a 147 break.

"Going for 147 has caused me problems in the past and cost me frames and even, matches. So, I never intentionally go for a maximum."

His style has gradually matured. The immense promise of youth is still there, but out is the tendency to rush shots and make silly mistakes, a folly of his early adulthood.

"There are aspects of my game I have improved on. I am taking more care over shots and becoming more of a percentage player. There is no way I am going to change my game totally, I am not going to stop and start thinking about every shot. Snooker is a natural instinct for me, I just go for a shot. It is the way I enjoy playing. You have got to do what is natural to you. It is a simple game, but you can make it hard by constantly tinkering with it."

A simple game but a great entertainer. One of the last in his sport. A veteran of so many things at only 22, O'Sullivan is to put the last two seasons of adversity behind him. He is committed to the game once more, and despite his family problems and problems with snooker's authorities, those involved with Ronnie have never seen him so focused.

For the first time in a long time, O'Sullivan feels comfortable with what he is doing. Who he is. The snooker world be warned.